

Sūrah 80

‘Abasa

(He Frowned)

(Makkan Period)

Title

The *Sūrah*'s opening word, *‘abasa* forms its title.

Period of Revelation

The Qur'ān and *Ḥadīth* scholars relate the *Sūrah*'s following circumstantial setting: once while the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him) was seated in the company of some Makkan chiefs, with a view to winning them over to Islam, a blind Companion, Ibn Umm Maktūm, arrived there, with a query about faith. The Prophet (peace be upon him) resented this interruption and acted with some indifference towards him. Against this backdrop, Allah sent down this *Sūrah*. In the light of this incident, it is easy to ascertain the date of its revelation.

First, it is on record that Ibn Umm Maktūm was one of the earliest Muslims. Both Ibn Ḥajar and Ibn Kathīr report that he accepted Islam at a very early date in Makkah.

Moreover, some of the reports of this incident specify that by then he had embraced Islam while some indicate his inclination

towards, not actual conversion to Islam at that time. These suggest that he had called on the Prophet (peace be upon him) as part of his quest for faith. 'Ā'ishah reports: "On his arrival he submitted: "O Messenger of Allah! Guide me to the straight way." (Tirmidhī, *Bāb al-Tafsīr*, *Ḥadīth* No. 3331. Ḥākim, Ibn Ḥibbān, Ibn Jarīr and Abū Ya'lā.) 'Abd Allāh ibn 'Abbās's version is: "He had gone there in order to learn from the Prophet (peace be upon him) the meaning of a Qur'ānic verse. He requested from the latter: "O Messenger of Allah! Impart to me the knowledge which Allah has bestowed upon you," (Ibn Jarīr and Ibn Abī Ḥātim). These reports affirm that by then he had recognized the Prophet (peace be upon him) as Allah's Messenger and the Qur'ān as God's Word. On the other hand, Ibn Zayd interprets Verse 3 of this *Sūrah* in the sense that he had arrived there in order to embrace Islam, (Ibn Jarīr "*Tafsīr Sūrah 'Abasa*"). That he was, at that time, drawn strongly towards Islam is also borne out by the following verses of this *Sūrah*:

How could you know? Perhaps he would cleanse himself,
or he might be mindful and good counsel might avail him...
But he who comes to you running, and fears (Allah), you
pay no heed to him.

(*'Abasa* 80: 3-4 and 8-10)

It is evident from the above that Ibn Umm Maktūm was by then inclined wholly towards accepting the truth and he had visited the Prophet (peace be upon him) in his capacity as the source of divine guidance. He was, thus, most likely to benefit from the latter's guidance.

Moreover, some reports specify the names of those present at that meeting. They were such inveterate enemies of Islam as 'Utbah, Shaybah, Abū Jahl, Umayyah ibn Khalaf and Ubayy ibn Khalaf. In other words, this incident happened at a time when the latter did have social relations with the Prophet (peace be upon him). For, as we know, such interaction stopped altogether as their opposition to Islam grew. All these pieces of internal evidence suggest that this *Sūrah* must have been revealed in the very early days of the Makkan period.

Subject Matter and Themes

Apparently the *Sūrah* reproaches the Prophet (peace be upon him) for his indifference towards the blind man and for his preferential treatment of the Makkan chiefs. On studying the *Sūrah* as a whole, however, it emerges that the reproach is actually directed at the Makkan chiefs for their rejection of the Prophet's call to truth; this as a result of their arrogance, stubbornness and disregard for the truth. The Prophet (peace be upon him) is, no doubt, instructed in the norms of preaching the truth, with a pointed reference to a lapse in his methodology in his early days of Messengership. His indifference towards that blind man and his greater attention to the chiefs did not stem from his regard for any class system. Nor did he betray any ill manners for which he stands censured in this *Sūrah* by Allah. The truth of the matter was that a preacher is instinctively more eager, especially in the early days of his mission, to win over the influential members of society. This after all, facilitates the spread of this message. For, even if a large number of the poor, weaker sections of the society had accepted his call, this would not bring about marked social change. The Prophet (peace be upon him) was no exception to this general trend. Out of utmost sincerity and concern for the success of his mission he focused his attention on the Makkan chiefs. So doing, he did not mean any disrespect to that blind man or to the poor in general. Allah, however, corrected his approach and plainly told him that a sincere seeker of the truth, irrespective of his social class, should receive greater attention. In any preaching of Islam, the weak, the poor and disabled are equally important if they are inclined towards faith. By the same token, such people should be disregarded, no matter how influential they might be in the society, who are not interested in greeting the truth. The Prophet (peace be upon him) is directed to convey his call to everyone in general yet he should focus on only those who are attracted towards it. His mission is too noble to be presented before the arrogant who pay no attention to it. They should not think that Islam stands in need of them.

The above incident permeates Verses 1-16 of the *Sūrah*. Verses 17-42 reproach the Makkan unbelievers who rejected the Prophet's

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call. They are censured for this response towards their Creator, Sustainer and Lord. The *Sūrah* ends with a note of warning to them that they will suffer terrible recompense on the Day of Judgement for their rebellion.